

ARMSTRONG'S VICTORY AT KITTANNING

IN THE SPRING OF 1756 the French and Indian War became painfully real to Pennsylvanians living west of the Susquehanna. The first scattered Indian raids, in the fall of 1755, had been interrupted by winter, but now were resumed in earnest. Incited and aided by the French enemy, recently established in western Pennsylvania, Delaware and Shawnee Indians, under their leaders, Shingas and Captain Jacobs, swept down to burn, kill, and capture.

During the winter the Province had built and garrisoned four forts west of the Susquehanna: Fort George (Patterson's Fort), Fort Granville, Fort Shirley, and Fort Lyttelton. These were so widely spaced, however, that the Indians passed them by to attack the settlements behind the defense line. In spring additional garrisons were placed at McDowell's Mill and at Carlisle, within the settlements them-

selves, but the raids continued. Prisoners who escaped their Indian captors reported that the war parties had their headquarters at Kittanning, a settlement of Delaware Indians who had removed from eastern Pennsylvania, and a place known for thirty years to Pennsylvania traders who dealt with these Indians. Now, it was said, this place (whose Delaware name means "at the great river") held more than a hundred white captives.

The frontier attacks reached a climax on July 30, 1756, when a force of Indians headed by Captain Jacobs and supported by fifteen Frenchmen besieged Fort Granville and, having set fire to the place and killed the lieutenant then in command, forced the garrison to surrender. This destruction of a Provincial fort called for revenge and also for a reorganization of defenses for greater strength and better pro-

tection. The chief responsibility for these tasks lay upon Lieutenant Colonel John Armstrong, commander of the Second Battalion of the Pennsylvania Regiment, which garrisoned the forts west of the Susquehanna. Accordingly, with the approval of Governor Robert Hunter Morris, the officer drew up secret plans for an attack upon the Indians. Using information obtained from John Baker, an escaped prisoner, he prepared to march almost his entire battalion to Kittanning.

Marching by various routes, 300 men of Armstrong's six garrisons assembled at Fort Shirley, the most advanced of the forts; and on Monday, August 30, the main body of troops set out from this place, preceded by an advance party which they overtook at the Allegheny Mountain on Friday, September 3. The route they followed was the old one used by the Indian traders, running across present Huntingdon, Blair, Cambria, Indiana, and Armstrong counties to the Allegheny River a little below present Kittanning. By Monday, September 6, the expedition, still undiscovered by the Indians, reached a point in present Cambria County about 50 miles from Kittanning. From this place scouts went forward to reconnoiter. Upon their return, the next day, the troops stored their supplies on scaffolds, and set out on an unbroken march, continuing into the night of September 7, to Kittanning.

Several miles southeast of Kittanning, Armstrong's scouts discovered a fire, with a few Indians visible around it. Not daring to attack this party for fear of alarming the town, Armstrong assigned Lieutenant James Hogg and twelve men to watch these Indians and to attack them at daybreak. The main body of troops moved on through the darkness. Not far away—traditionally, at a place now called Blanket Hill—the men left their horses, blankets, and other baggage, and turned from the path to make a detour through the woods. The setting moon lighted the head of the column to the river, within a quarter-mile of the lower end of the Indian town.

Wearied from a thirty-mile march, the soldiers slept briefly, until daybreak. Then the last companies in the column, who had not yet descended the steep hill east of the town, were ordered to march northward along this hill, to outflank the main Indian settlement. About twenty minutes later, Armstrong ordered the attack to begin. Led by their captains, the soldiers advanced into the lower part of the town, from which many of the Indians fled.

Captain Jacobs and some others stood their ground, however. Aided by a French officer, De Normanville, who had arrived the day before with a few men, the Indians rallied and resisted vigorously. Armstrong, Captain Mercer (commander at Fort Shirley), and an ensign were wounded, and several of their men were wounded or killed. The Indians had the protection of their log cabins; but Captain Jacobs' house was set on fire, and he, his wife, and his son were shot down as they fled. Then other houses burned, and a store of powder blew up. But the flanking party had been unable to cut off the Indians' retreat, and enemy reinforcements were seen crossing the river from Shingas' settlement on the west bank. Accordingly, after his men had taken fourteen scalps and recovered eleven white prisoners from the town, Armstrong ordered his troops to retire.

Meantime, Lieutenant Hogg and his men had attacked the Indians at the campfire, only to find themselves facing an equal number of the enemy. The lieutenant and five of his men were killed, two others were wounded, and the rest escaped when the Indians became alarmed by the noise of the attack at the town. Then, in the general retreat, Captain Mercer and a dozen of his men, mostly former Indian traders, decided to take a different way home, fell in with Hogg's beaten men, and became badly scattered.

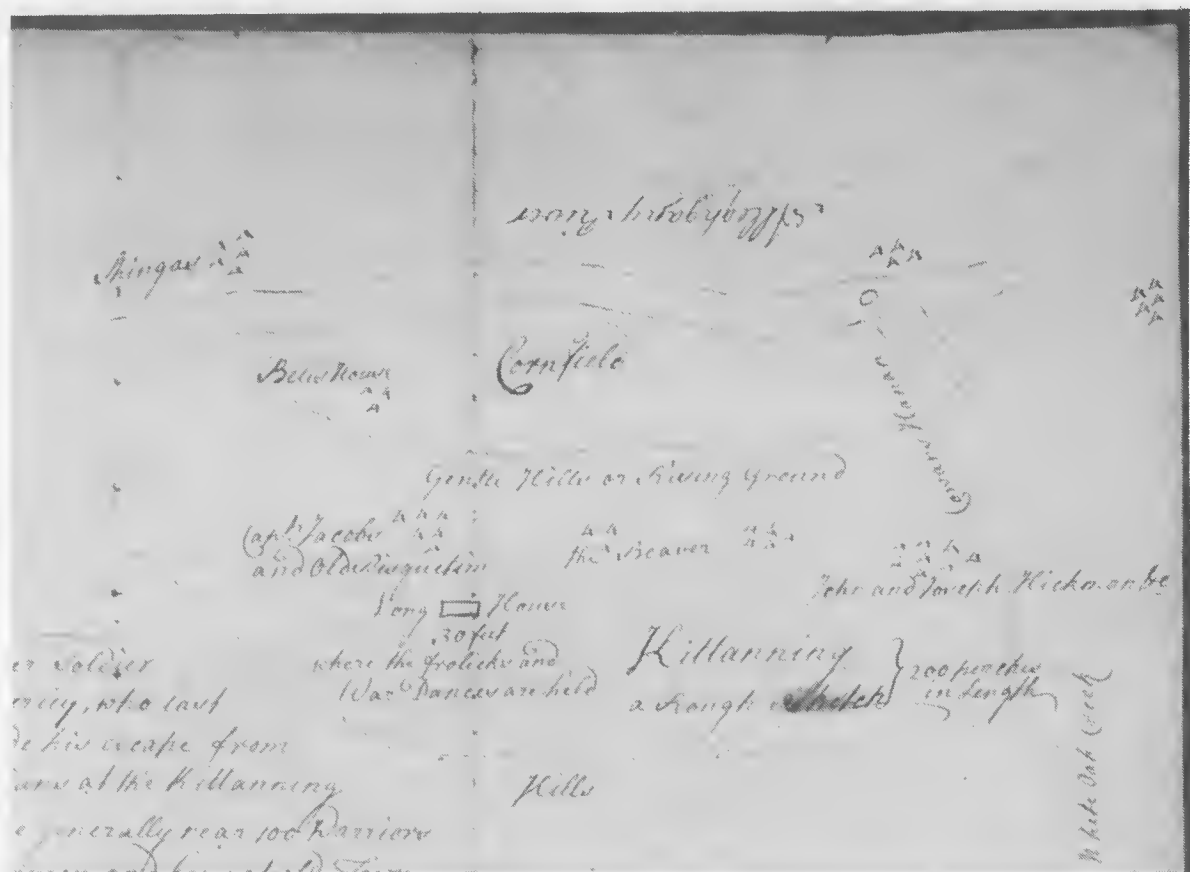
The main body of troops, with Armstrong, retreated by the road they had come. Unencumbered by their blankets, which they had left behind, they traveled rapidly and were unmolested by any pursuers. Fort Shirley had been evacuated, its gates removed when the expedition set out; so the returning troops made their way to Fort Lyttelton, arriving there on Sunday, September 12.

Two days later, when Armstrong drew up his report to the Governor, he computed his losses at 17 men killed, 13 wounded, and 19 (including Captain Mercer) missing. Also missing were four of the eleven liberated prisoners. Among the dead was John Baker, the former captive, Armstrong's "best assistant," who had volunteered to guide the expedition. Of the missing soldiers, three arrived at Fort Cumberland, Maryland, on September 17, one at Fort Augusta (present Sunbury) on the 19th, and the wounded Captain Mercer at Fort Lyttelton on September 22. One man, who turned back at the Allegheny Mountain to get his lost coat, was pursued and killed by Indians; and a man and a woman of the escaped white prisoners were taken by the Indians and tortured to death.

at Kittanning. Armstrong thought that thirty or forty Indians had been killed, but the Indians themselves reported their losses as seven men and two women. The Indian account probably was nearer correct, though it apparently included only adults.

The raid carried out by Armstrong's battalion was too expensive and risky to be repeated, and even with the advantage of surprise the attackers probably suffered greater losses than the enemy. The Province attempted no more such attacks, but instead drew back from Fort George, Fort Granville, and Fort Shirley to a defense line running from Carlisle to Fort Lyttelton.

Nevertheless, Armstrong's attack was of real benefit to Pennsylvania, not only through its bracing effect on the spirits of the settlers but also through the setback it inflicted on the Indians, one out of all proportion to their actual losses. The Delawares abandoned their settlements at Kittanning, retiring from them to the shelter of the French forts and to less exposed towns on the Beaver River and farther west. Shingas, for whose head large rewards had been offered at Philadelphia and in Virginia, had escaped, but his Indian followers suffered such loss of confidence in their own power and in their French allies that the vigor and boldness of their earlier attacks was thereafter lacking.



Courtesy of American Philosophical Society

THE INDIAN SETTLEMENT AT KITTANNING

This map, drawn by Armstrong, is part of his written proposal for the expedition. The west side of the map, with the river, is at the top. Based on John Baker's information, the map shows the Long House, "where the frolics and War Dances are held," and the homes of the leading Indians: Shingas (across the river), Captain Jacobs and Shingas' oldest brother, Pisquetim, and his other brothers, the Beaver and Hickman. Armstrong's men attacked from a point near the left edge of this map.

On October 5 the Philadelphia City Council gave Armstrong a vote of thanks and set aside 150 pounds for appropriate gifts to him and his officers. Rewards equal to those for Shingas had been offered for Captain Jacobs. On October 30 the Provincial Commissioners paid Armstrong 272 pounds for Indian scalps and

returned prisoners; and on January 5, 1757, the Philadelphia Council sent him its present of plate and medals. Years afterward, when John Armstrong received a grant of land at Kittanning, the name he gave the tract was both appropriate and deserved: "Victory."



Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Museum

THE KITTANNING MEDAL

Obverse, Philadelphia coat of arms: THE GIFT OF THE CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA. Reverse, Attack on Kittanning: KITANNING DESTROYED BY COL. ARMSTRONG. SEPTEMBER 8, 1756. (The portrayal of the attack is reversed; Armstrong's men, advancing on the town from the south, actually had the river on their left.)

Published by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg. Second printing, 1995. Text by William A. Hunter; edited by Donald H. Kent and William A. Hunter.